

**Ashley Morgan-Shae** is a Melbourne-born poet. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Professional Writing from Deakin University, with a second major in Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne/Victorian College of the Arts. Ashley's collections of poetry include - *Whirring at Night: An anthology of new poetry* (Ashley Morgan-Shae ed.) (1996, Grendon Press); *Dancing at Dusk* (1997, Grendon Press); *New Cities* (1999, Grendon Press) and her most recent book *Love Trash* (2002), published by Five Islands Press. Her short stories and poems have appeared in numerous literary journals and little magazines including *Verandah*, *Hecate*, *Overland*, *Meanjin*, *SideWalk* and *Island*.

The first thing that strikes you about Ashley Morgan-Shae's poetry is its intensity and imagery: "hip, lean...and streetwise" according to Melbourne poet Ian McBryde, a style that has also been described as "compulsive and unalloyed" in its resonance.

Having recently published her forth poetry collection - *Love Trash* - Ashley Morgan-Shae has quickly developed a reputation as talented, innovative and observant poet whose work has appeared widely in numerous respected Australian literary journals.

Ironically, while Morgan-Shae has become best known for her poetry, it was her short story writing that initially lead her to publishing much of her earlier work in literary journals. As Ashley reflects, "the poetry I used to actually put down as I never thought it was as important as the stories, but now I have to say its the form of writing that people recognize me for."

Although she continues to enjoy writing and publishing her short stories, her poetry has become somewhat of a trademark as she continues to build her already impressive literary curriculum vitae.

A former student in Deakin University's Professional Writing and Editing program, Ashley developed a close writing and publishing bond with poet, teacher and mentor Judith Rodriguez, whom she describes today as a "very special person."

Indeed, Judith Rodriguez's influence not only helped to play a major part in shaping the development of Ashley's poetry, but also in establishment of Grendon Press, the publishing imprint that provided the vehicle for the publication of Morgan-Shae's first two collections of poetry, as well as *Whirring at Night*, an anthology of new poetry which she edited.

As Ashley went on to explain, Grendon Press was founded in the wake of the closure of Deakin University's Professional Writing course at its Toorak Campus, a time of sadness for the many students who had thrived in the intellectual environment provided by the staff and surrounds of the program. Accordingly, as an enduring tribute to Grendon - the building which housed the Professional Writing course's teaching staff - Grendon Press was founded as vehicle not only for the publication of the students' poetry, but also as a remembrance of campus and its many inspirational memories.

Aside from writing, art - and in particular, drawing - has always had a close synergy with Morgan-Shae's creative life. As Ashley reflects, her writing and drawing have always "...bounced off each other." Consequently, where drawing allows for her creative energies to be directed in the visual rather than written form, the two combine as two powerful alternative expressions depending on mood and clarity of thought: "art is good when you don't know how to say things...somehow things creep through and tell you things...writing is more a form [of expression] where you have your thoughts clear..." Indeed, Ashley's art has also influenced her poetry in the sorts of imagery and word play that she uses which is best summed up her own words, "I'm a very visual writer..."

While Ashley has found great deal of inspiration in her artwork and drawing, a number of important poetic influences have also shaped her work. Although one may find some similar affectations in Morgan-Shae's writing to those, for example, of Sylvia Plath's, Ashley firmly rejects what she calls Plath's "good girl" approach to her writing in contrast to the more 'earthy' approach taken by poets such as Anne Sexton. As Morgan-Shae reflects, "[Anne] Sexton is one of my heroes...her early work is very rhythmic...she always broke new ground." Apart from American poet Anne Sexton, Ashley also recalls that she has been inspired by a diverse and eclectic range of poets including, "Dorothy Parker, Judith Rodriguez and e.e. cummings."

So how does Ashley Morgan-Shae go about the process of writing poetry?

While Ashley is meticulous in the crafting of her poems, like many writers, she sometimes feels that initiating a piece of work is the most challenging phase, "the hardest thing is getting started to do something...once you get started I do draft and re-draft." Once a poem is started however, Ashley often spends as great deal of time crafting an individual piece until she feels that it is just right. For example, 'Drug in my blood', the opening poem in *Dancing at Dusk* "...went through three days of work before every beat was in place..."

Rhythm and rhyming therefore play an important part in Ashley's writing, and her style of writing also invokes a strong sense of musicality which is reflected in her notion that "...rhythm is music and poetry needs music."

Indeed, Ashley also plays tribute to the "...many wonderful people that I can read things to..." as part of her process of gaining feedback about her poems and the impact that they will potentially have on the reader.

And what are Morgan-Shae's views about the role of poetry and its impact on the reader as individual, and society more broadly?

No doubt Ashley's effusive passion for poetry is summed up in her comment that - "Writing and poetry are like the soul... you can't do without them." Accordingly, Ashley also believes that it is most important that her poetry connects with people at an individual level and that it relates to people. This notion also happily coexists with her idea that- "...poetry should always entertain [the reader]".

So what advice would she give to any young poet who is just starting to write poetry?

Essentially, Ashley believes that once you have a taste for writing poetry as a writer you become compulsive or 'addicted' to it as a form of self-expression and observation: "They [writers] don't have a choice anyway. They'll have to keep writing anyway no matter what. Just believe that there is some value in what you are doing...poetry is in the blood and you can never cut it out."

Honesty with yourself is also an important part in writing poetry for Ashley Morgan-Shae as she powerfully suggests, "you can't lie to yourself when you are writing."

Accordingly, it is then a matter of persisting with your work and sending it out to magazines and journals as she herself has done many times over in the past thirteen years since she first began publishing her work.

No doubt we look forward to reading more of Ashley's insightful and engaging work - powerful writing that has already won considerable attention and praise, as well as an ever-growing and dedicated audience.

**Interview and Story by Marcus Niski, Copyright, 2003**

**Originally published in The Australian Writer #**